

Introducing & Multiplying DNA Groups (Part 3)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt 28:16–20)

Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4?

- A. This is now the third message in a mini-series we’ve been running entitled Introducing and Multiplying DNA Groups.
 - 1. I know I said part 3 would be the last, but I need one more week with you on this. What this means is that some of the questions and practical stuff you’re still wondering about will have to be pushed back one more week. But I trust you’ll find it is for good reason.
- B. Because each sermon has been building on the last, let me quickly summarize where we’ve been before diving into the new material I have for us this morning.
- C. In the first sermon . . .
 - 1. I simply made the case from the verses I just read there in [Matthew 28](#), that every Christian, or follower of Christ, is to be a disciple of Jesus busy making disciples of Jesus.
 - a. And I explained that my hope with the launch of these DNA Groups is to provide some sort of orienting vision and supporting structure to help us move towards that call together as a church.
 - 2. Then I spent the majority of that first message attempting to give something of the biblical and theological background to these groups.
 - a. The long and short of what we saw is that human beings were originally made in the image of God, and in our sin we’ve marred that image. But now in Christ—through His death and resurrection—we have been given the opportunity to be renewed in it once more.
 - i. The goal in our salvation is that we would look again like our Dad—we’d have His eyes, His smile, His hands, His feet. The means of getting us there, of renewing in the image of God, is discipleship to Jesus.

- (1) Discipleship to Jesus is the way we are progressively transformed at that molecular, DNA, level. He gets ahold of our hearts and remakes us by His Spirit from the inside out. By grace, we grow and change for the good.
- D. In the second sermon, I took the entirety of our time and simply expounded on the definition of a DNA Group. I obviously can't recount all of that here. But I can at least just restate the definition once more: "DNA Groups are smaller groups of committed people who meet on a consistent basis to Discover, Nurture, and Apply Christ together until He is all in all."
1. Though we looked at each part of this definition last time bit by bit, you might recall I gave most of my time in particular to discussing those basic steps that form our acronym DNA. I wanted us to get a better sense of what exactly is involved in this Discovering, Nurturing, and Applying Christ.
 - a. After all, these three basic steps really form the backbone to these groups and set forth my understanding at least of what discipleship to Jesus actually entails and just how it is that we are being slowly renewed in His image.
 - i. We Discover something of Him and the gospel with our heads; we Nurture the things discovered in our hearts through repentance and faith and prayer; and we Apply them by the Spirit in love to all of life with our hands.
- E. It is because of the fundamental importance of these steps here that I actually intend this morning to lead us into an even deeper consideration of them. To be more specific, I suppose you could say I actually want to show you what stands in back of them.
1. There's a sort of substructure, a model for change and renewal that the Bible puts forward, that stands behind and really informs my understanding of Discover, Nurture, and Apply. And I want you to see it.
 - a. I want our DNA Group members in general and our DNA Group Facilitators in particular to know how is it that people change and grow and come to look more and more like Jesus? How does progressive sanctification and image renewal actually work? And how can we partner with God in this?
 - i. My hope is that this model will equip you to more wisely interact with and love the other members of your DNA Group.
- F. So this morning I really only have two things on the agenda: (1) I want to show you this biblical model for change that I'm referring to; and then (2) I want to help you see how it stands behind and relates to this process of Discovering, Nurturing, and Applying Christ.

(1) A Biblical Model for Change

The Three Trees

- A. The model that I am now going to present to you has come to be referred to over the years as the Three Trees. It was originally developed by David Powlison (though it's been taken up and expounded upon by many after him—most notably: Tim Lane and Paul Tripp in their book *How People Change* and Andrew Nicholls and Helen Thorne in their little workbook *Real Change: Becoming More like Jesus in Everyday Life*).
1. Powlison was the former executive director of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation. He only recently passed away from pancreatic cancer and the countless tributes that sprung up on the internet in the days after are testimony to the significant impact this man had on the world of Christian thought in general and biblical counseling in particular.
 - a. And I dare say it is probably his work on this Three Trees model that has been most influential of all.
- B. While at Westminster Theological Seminary, I had the privilege of taking a course from him that was essentially just an extended discussion of and elaboration on this model: *The Dynamics of Biblical Change*. It may sound a bit trite, but the course truly did change my life.
1. The model he put forward there for biblical change and sanctification was at one and the same time simple (able to be easily comprehended) and complex (able to manage and make sense of the vast complexities of life). And, of course, it was eminently biblical.
 - a. I certainly cannot do much more this morning than merely summarize the model for you, but I trust even in this you shall find help for your growth in grace. (I should say, if this leaves you wanting more, you might consider reading *How People Change* or even taking the course I just mentioned through CCEF's online program. You won't regret it!)
- C. But now enough of these introductory words! Let us press on to quickly consider the model itself. The idea for it really seems to have sprung from a text in Jeremiah—[Jeremiah 17:5-10](#). Let's read it together: [“⁵ Thus says the Lord: “Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. ⁶ He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. ⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. ⁸ He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.” ⁹ The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? ¹⁰ “I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”](#)”
1. Now, in an effort to keep things streamlined, let me simply read to you how Lane and Tripp break down this vivid image put forward here by Jeremiah: [“In verse 8, the image of Heat describes life in a fallen world \[it's hard, it's hot\]. In verse 6, a Thorn bush in the wasteland represents the ungodly person who turns away from God. Verses 5 and 7 give a clear reference to the Lord as the Redeemer who comforts, cleanses, and empowers those who trust him. \[In our model\] \[w\]e represent this part of the passage by the Cross to summarize](#)

all of God's redemptive activity on our behalf. In verses 7 and 8, we see the metaphor of a Fruit tree. It represents the godly person who trusts in the Lord. Verses 9 and 10 show us a God who does not simply focus on our behavior. Though he does not ignore it, his focus is on our hearts. He is the ultimate searcher of hearts, because they are central to the change process he undertakes in us as our Redeemer" (pp. 83).

Six Elements

- A. From this then, there are at least six important elements I should like to draw your attention to and elaborate upon. And with these we are starting to fill in the details of our model. [See Slide #1]

Element #1: Heat

- A. Heat represents the situation or circumstances a person finds him or herself in. Whether things are especially hard or good, there are certain pressures and temptations that we are inevitably facing at all times (cf. [Deut 8](#)).
1. In moments of hardship, we are tempted to abandon hope in God and put our trust in something else that might bring some sort of immediate relief. We are tempted to self-save and take matters into our own hands.
 2. In moments of blessing, we are tempted in a different direction, are we not? When things are going well we are tempted to forget that "[e]very good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" ([James 1:17](#)). Indeed, we are prone to forget God entirely. And instead we start to act as if we don't need Him, as if we have accomplished such good things in our own strength.
- B. When you think of it, is this not precisely what we see play out over and over again in the story of Israel?
1. In harder situations they throw up their hands and accuse God of abandoning them—"He's brought us out here to kill us!" They call on other gods and other nations to help where it seems YHWH has left them hanging.
 2. But in more pleasant situations, it's no better. In fact, it's usually worse. They get drunk on their own prosperity and it often requires some hardship to sober them up and bring them back to reality.
- C. So Heat—it's the situation we find ourselves in—whether good or hard. It's the context for our growth in grace. It's the surroundings whereby God tests and exposes our hearts and our true colors are shown.

Element #2: Thorns

- A. Thorns represent our initial and ungodly reactions to the heat around us.
1. Here is where the man who, upon getting news that his boss has let him go, stomps down through the hall, and slams the door to his office in a fit of rage.

2. Here is the woman who, upon being made fun of at the gym for her weight, promptly heads to the bathroom stall and gags out her latest meal.
 3. Here is my son Levi who, when one of his sisters takes a toy from him, responds by taking a handful of their hair.
- B. Life is hard. The heat gets turned up. We are often sinned against. But this does not justify our own sinning. Yet, in the face of severe heat or drought or whichever of Jeremiah's images you want to use, sadly, this is often how we respond. Self-love, self-pity, self-concern.
1. Not the fruit of love for God and others . . . but thorns.

Element #3: Turning Heart

- A. But there is something underneath the thorns.
1. In the world of botany, we refer to that fundamental part of the plant beneath the thorns, beneath the ground, as its roots. If things are off in the branches above ground, it's often because things are off in some deeper more fundamental way beneath the ground in the roots.
 2. In the biblical understanding of how human beings work, we liken this idea of roots to the person's heart. The heart is understood as the center of a man and the seat of his will and desires and emotions.
 - a. It is to this that Jeremiah refers there in [verse 5](#), if you noticed: "[Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord.](#)" There is something beneath the sinful, thorny reactions of people: namely, a heart that has turned away from the Lord.
- B. Here is where we begin to talk about things like motivations. Why do people react the way they do. What are they hoping to get out of it? What are they afraid of? What are they believing? Who or what are they trusting? Who or what are they serving? Who or what are they loving?
- C. When a person's heart has wandered from the Lord, it will manifest itself in the person's life.
1. Somewhere beneath the man's angry slamming of his office door is a heart that has forgotten God's promise to protect and provide for him and turn all things for good ([Rom 8:28](#)). He feels like the layoff was unfair and he wants the whole office to know about it. He is not trusting God to avenge and make things right in His own time ([Rom 12:19](#)). He wants justice, even vengeance, now. He may go home and start a smear campaign online. He may key his boss' car on the way out.
 - a. He's been hurt and now he wants to hurt in return. The heart has turned away from God. The root has gone bad.
 2. The woman in the bathroom stall, as tragic as that picture is, has wandered from her identity in Christ—she is not justified or accepted on the basis of her appearance or waistline but on the basis of Christ's work on the cross. He loves her. He has given His life

for her. He has washed her with the water of His word and will present her to Himself “in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph 5:27). He has made her beautiful.

- a. But she wants the guys to notice her. She wants the ladies at the gym to respect her, even envy her. She’s lost her way. Her heart has turned. The root has gone bad. And it’s starting to show above ground in her life now in devastating ways.

Element #4: Cross

- A. But the picture back in [Jeremiah 17](#) makes it plain that running underneath all of these hard and hot situations there are streams of living water available to us if we should so desire.

1. Here is where we remember what the Psalmist says in [Psalm 46:1](#): “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.”
2. Here is where we remember what Paul declares in [1 Corinthians 10:13](#): “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”
3. Here is where we remember that text we always read at Christmas but desperately need to remember all the yearlong: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel’ (which means, God with us)” (Matt 1:23).

- a. God is with us in the heat. And we see this most profoundly in the person and work of Jesus, represented in our model here as the cross—the third “tree,” as it were.

- B. I love how Nicholls and Thorne sum this element up: “[The cross] represents all the promises of God’s mercy, culminating in Jesus’ death and resurrection. Through the cross of Christ our “bad root” is transformed. We are forgiven. We are given a new life. We are connected to streams of living water—the Spirit of Christ. It’s in going to Jesus and asking for forgiveness for our self-centered desires, thoughts, and actions that transformation begins and continues. Change happens as the Spirit brings us to the God of mercies” (pp. 10-11).

- C. So the man in our example, catches himself before he slams that door and he prays. He speaks to the God who is near. He asks Jesus for help. He kneels down on the floor underneath his desk, and he opens his Bible and reads. He sets his roots down into the streams of living water available to Him in Christ.

1. And something changes . . .

Element #5: Trusting Heart

- A. Through personal engagement with Jesus in His word, through repentance and faith and desperate prayer, the Turning Heart is now becoming the Trusting Heart: “⁷ Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord.^{8a} He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream . . .” (vv. 7-8a).

1. There is something changing inside. His identity isn’t wrapped up in his work. He isn’t as worried about being wronged. He just fellowshiped with the Son of God who was wronged

for him, who was crucified for his sin. Jesus gives him strength to face his own injustices with patience and love.

- a. He packs up his things, walks over to his boss' office, shakes his hand, looks him in the eyes, and says: "Thanks for the years here sir. I'm really going to miss you all." And he means it.

Element #6: Fruit

- A. In other words: with roots sunk deep into the streams of living water this tree begins to bear new and surprising and good fruit: "[It] does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."
- B. Notice: the heat hasn't changed. He still has a bad boss. But the heart has. Because of Jesus. And therefore, this man can walk through the same exact situation albeit in a radically different way—in a way that looks like Jesus!

(2) Mapping Our Basic Steps onto the Biblical Model

- A. This is the biblical model for change and image renewal that stands behind the basic steps of Discover, Nurture, and Apply. Let me quickly show you how these steps map onto this model: [See Slide #2]
 1. Discover corresponds with the cross level in the Three Trees model. We come to learn more of who God is and what He has said and done in Christ.
 2. Nurture corresponds with the root level in the Three Trees model. Our hearts need to move from loving, trusting, and obeying false gods and gospels to loving, trusting, and obeying the one true God and gospel as revealed in Jesus.
 3. Apply corresponds with the fruit level in the Three Trees model. We are after transformation and renewal in the image of Jesus, and this means our hands need to shift from bearing the fruits of the flesh to bearing the fruits of the Spirit through the cross of Christ (cf. [Gal 5:16-24](#)).

Putting It All Together

- A. In an effort to show you how all of this fits together, let me return to the example of that woman I mentioned. Maybe she's a part of your DNA Group. She needs to change. You can see it. God wants it for her. You want it for her. But how do you help?
 1. It's important to see that, in our efforts to help her, we must consider every aspect of our model and each of these three steps or we shall find that, in the end, we have actually done her a great disservice.
- B. That being said, the unfortunate reality is that we often do tend to reduce things and focus in on one piece to the neglect of the others.

1. Let me show you three potential reductions you might be tempted to make in your well-meaning attempt to help this woman change and grow. And, in seeing what not to do, we'll finally land on what exactly it is that we should.

Reduction #1: Just Change the Heat

- A. Some of us may be tempted to merely focus on changing the heat. If we can change the situation, or get her out of that gym and away from those nasty ladies, then that will change her, she'll feel better about herself and things.
 1. So you encourage her to cancel that gym membership and try out another one—maybe a gym like the one near where my kids go to gymnastics. In big letters on the wall outside of the building they have a sign that reads: “Judgment Free Zone.” Maybe she'd feel better there.
- B. But tinkering with the situation externally, is only a superficial fix, is it not? This woman's problems will follow her to a new gym, won't they? If it's not the ladies at the gym that set her off then it will be the commercials that run on the TV she watches before bed, or the magazine covers she passes by while checking out at the grocery store.
 1. Changing her situation may help her feel better for a little while, but, all the while, the stuff going wrong on the inside at a fundamental level has still not been addressed.
- C. Aren't we all prone to this sort of thing? We like to blame our problems on stuff outside of us. We kid ourselves into thinking that if we tinker with our situation and get it just right, all will be well with us. If I could just get a different job, if I just get a different house in a different city that's not so expensive, if I could just get that different relationship with a different woman, well then all would fall into place for me and I would be happy, at peace, free. But it never works.

Reduction #2: Just Change the Fruit

- A. Others of us might recognize that there is still something on her part that God would want to change, but we simply focus on the fruit or Apply level. We analyze her behavior, see that it's wrong, and tell her to “Just stop it.”
 1. It sounds cold and harsh and yet how many of us parents talk to our kids in exactly this way. “I see your behavior. I don't like it. So just stop it.” “Why Daddy?” “Because I said so. And that should be enough for you!”
 - a. Sadly, we often don't go much deeper than that—to the heart underneath their behavior. What were they wanting? Why did they do it? And how can Jesus bring fresh help to those places?
- B. Now at the risk of making light of this deadly reduction, I actually do want to play a video for you that ran a long while back on Comedy Central. One of my counseling courses at Westminster actually played this for us, so I suppose I feel justified in it.

1. My hope in showing you this is not that you simply have a good laugh, though it is quite funny. My hope is that the silliness of this sketch will burn in your minds something of the absurdity of this approach to care and counsel that simply focuses on the behavior level and acts as if you can just move from thorn to fruit tree in an automatic sort of way.
 - a. I hope it will help you catch yourself when you are going there with others in your DNA Groups or wherever. The human person is complex and the change process is equally so. We can't just stop it. Though sometimes we wish it were that simple.

Reduction #3: Just Change the Root

- A. Still others of us might see the superficiality of this fruit approach and try to move towards the heart at that root or Nurture level. We get that our actions are a result of certain beliefs and desires and things. But still we are prone to make terrible reductions.
- B. Here is where secular psychology puts forward things like Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. So, for this woman, if she wants to change her behavior she simply needs to change the way she thinks. She needs to change the way she talks to herself, thinks about herself, etc. "Here's what I want you to do: right after you wake up in the morning and right before you go to bed in the evening, go into your bathroom, look at yourself in the mirror, and repeat these three words at least ten times: 'I am beautiful.'"
1. You see, they're trying to get at the stuff on the inside. They can see that she's struggling with deeper issues of identity and acceptance and things. And such strategies might bring relief for a little while. But, again, the solution doesn't go deep enough.
 - a. Her positive self-talk will eventually fail her because it's not rooted in ultimate reality—the ultimate reality that is revealed to us in the gospel.
- C. She doesn't just need to change the way she talks to herself. She needs to let Jesus talk to her. She needs to let Him tell her what to think about herself. She needs to let Him lead her to the cross.
 1. It's only there in the light of the cross that she can both own up to her sin and confess the wandering of her heart, while at the same time finding forgiveness and acceptance and security in the One who loved her so much He gave His life for her.

Discover, Nurture, and Apply Christ!

- A. So here is where we finally have come to that cross and Discover level. This woman cannot change on her own. She needs to be led to Jesus and encouraged to re-root herself in Him.
 1. You see, we need the whole model and every step—Discover, Nurture, and Apply . . . Christ! That is the only way to true and lasting change!
 - a. And the point of these DNA Groups is to engage in this sort of thing together!